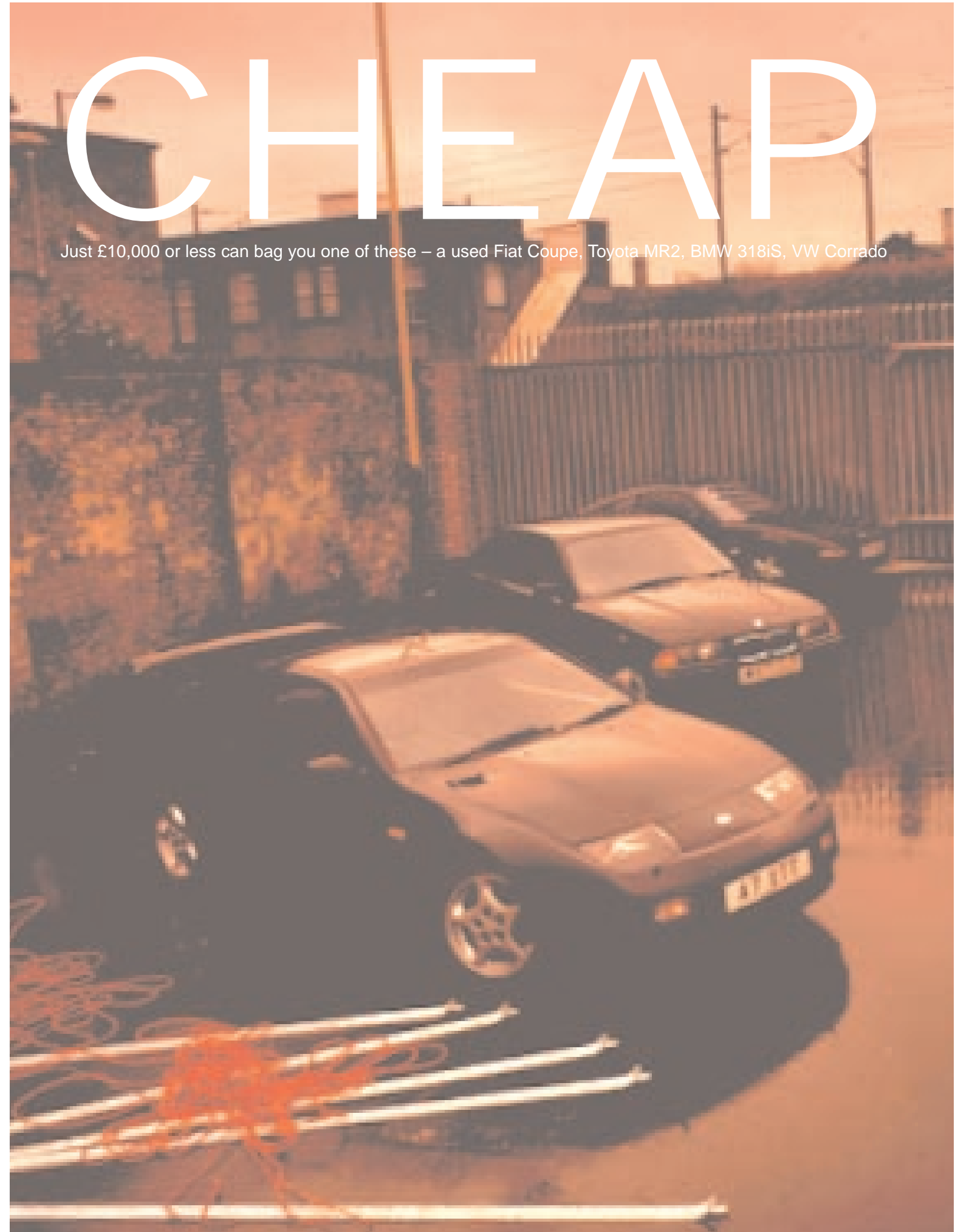


# CHEAP

Just £10,000 or less can bag you one of these – a used Fiat Coupe, Toyota MR2, BMW 318iS, VW Corrado



# SKATES

VR6 or Nissan 300ZX. That's a lot of flash for your cash, but how do they drive and what are the risks?

Story Peter Grunert  
Photography Ian Dawson





It's a used BMW, so this must surely be our clear winner? Right? Really? Time, then, to get those preconceptions out the way: 'This is a perfect example of Teutonic build quality... set-in-stone residuals... the ultimate driving machine... blahdy, blahdy, blah.'

Got that out of your system? Good, now let's take a fresh look.

What we have on offer here is a BMW 318iS coupe. Realistically, a 1994 L-plate 60,000-mile 318iS is the best Beemer our £10,000 will buy.

Despite having a mere 1.8-litre four-cylinder 16-valve engine (swapped for an equally modestly powerful 1.9-litre after May 1996) it's the most popular used 3-Series Coupe. The 318iS is preferred over the straight-six-engined 320i for its similar performance yet greater economy, relative insurability and impression of mechanical simplicity.

True, unearth that pukka 3-Series and all that long-accepted wisdom will, indeed, ring true. Even this entry-level 318iS handles with great poise and fluidity, despite the use it's had. The sweetly balanced rear-wheel drive chassis just urges eager driving, even if the engine's restrained 140bhp doesn't offer searing straight-line performance. However, add in cossetting refinement, the only useable rear seats of any car in this test and relaxed motorway manners, and the BMW looks a wise investment for the long haul.

Now enter reality. BMW 3-Series Coupes aren't the cast-iron bets they once were. That once high-achieving

image has been dented by the profusion of tasteless and generally rogered 3-Series; too many are hampered by crap alloys, peeling window tints and suspect owners. And even perfectly kept cars are starting to look a tad dated.

The market is swarming with nasty, driven-into-the-ground high-mile 318iS coupes. Ex-fleet cars are often ruined inside by mobile phone holders bolted on to the dash, fag burns in the carpet and mysterious but icky seat stains.

Cars that appear sound need equal caution, the 3-Series being the used car market's prime target for bodgers, clockers and tea-leaves, so invest in an expert inspection before buying.

These aren't the cheapest cars to run and a temptation to ignore maintenance schedules is boosted by steepish prices at BMW main dealers. Best to look to BMW's 10 approved Autotechnic outlets, offering full back up at discounted rates for cars four years old and over.

Signs of a 318iS that hasn't received such nurturing is a clutch that offers as much bite as your gran with her teeth out, an intrusive (and imminently expensive) tappetty ticking from the engine bay and the slightest sogginess in the car's handling. Electronic service indicators are also ridiculously easy to tamper with.

So, remember: owning a well-loved 318iS can be deeply satisfying – but end up buying a car with bald tyres, soft shockers and a cream-cracked engine, and you might as well be binning that 10 grand on a Triumph Dolomite.

#### BMW 318iS

##### ENGINE/PERFORMANCE

1,796cc, 16v 4cyl, 140bhp  
0-60mph in 9.0secs, 132mph

##### TYPICAL PRICES

1993/K 100,000 miles	£8,295
1994/L 60,000 miles	£10,000
1995/N 50,000 miles	£12,350
1997/R 30,000 miles	£15,495

##### SERVICING (see indicator display)

minor	£95
intermediate	£205
major	£290

##### PARTS/COST

headlamp unit	£193.88
front wing	£167.79
front shock	£114.75
front brake discs (pair)	£117.50
clutch kit	£152.57

##### INSURANCE

all	13
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##### CONTACT

BMW Car Club GB 01264 337883

##### I BOUGHT ONE

Andre Lindow garage proprietor



It's got good performance, good fuel economy and good residual values.

I suppose that makes it a good all-rounder. Build quality is excellent too. My business means I've owned several; overall

I've experienced very few problems with any of them.



Now prepare for a surprise with the flashiest of our flashy coupes: the Fiat Coupé is a blinding used bargain. An early N-plater 16v Turbo fits easily within our £10,000 budget, and a non-turbo car can be up to a grand less.

So why, you might ask, is the Fiat so affordable? It's a desirable car after all, even if not quite so startlingly outrageous as when it first squealed on to British roads in mid-1995. This Fiat Coupé is also a rapid bit of kit. The quickest of the pre-October 1996 four-cylinder cars are surged forward by a two-litre turbocharged powerplant pumping out a beefy 195bhp – this engine last being seen in the legendary Lancia Integrale. Such turbocharged oomph makes the Fiat the second quickest of our coupe line-up, after the stomping Nissan 300ZX.

The problem is found on the end of the car's nose. You see, it's the badge. Initial depreciation remains heavy as the Fiat name continues to bring with it a reputation for poor reliability and rusting bodywork. Discourteous official dealers, steep servicing charges and frustrating trim and electrical problems on new and nearly-new cars only serve to drive that impression home.

So now the good news. The Fiat Coupé makes a vastly better used buy than perceived wisdom would suggest. Major mechanical problems are infrequent, while rust simply isn't an issue. Our leggy 89,000-mile N-plater test car felt exactly as it would have when new – which means that it had the odd

scruffy bit of trim, the occasional mis-aligned switch, yet still had taut handling and nice direct steering. And it was very, very quick.

The four-pot engine growls even at idle. Hoof the throttle and there's a laggy pause until – blam – grab another ratio from the marginally notchy 'box and the front end fights for grip, before you're sent searing off up the road.

The Coupé shows its modernity with traction control to tame all that power going through the front wheels. There's also anti-lock braking to haul it all to a stop. Watch for the warning lights on the dash for these electronic goodies, while a clutch that engages high in the pedal's travel suggests more potential bills. Meanwhile exhaust smoke – white or blue – points to that rare thing, a totally shagged turbo.

The main worry, says independent specialist Graham Holder of the Wimbledon Carriage Company, "is that the people who buy Fiat Coupés can afford not to look after them. Bumpers get scuffed and these cars have no side protection at all. Most end up so scruffy it wouldn't be worth the cost of putting them right."

But seek out a cared-for car with a fully stamped-up history, and you'll have the most charismatic coupe here; sounds great, fun to drive and will continue to look unique in 20 years' time.

Owners will just have to accept that the Fiat Coupé now has the slight whiff of yesterday's fashion accessory about it. Like Cilla Black's shoulder pads.

#### FIAT COUPE

##### ENGINE/PERFORMANCE

1,995cc 16v 4cyl turbo, 195bhp  
0-60mph 6.8secs, 140mph

##### TYPICAL PRICES

1995/M 97,000 miles	£8,700
1995/N 60,000miles	£10,000
1996/N 45,000miles	£11,895
1996/P 35,000miles	£13,125

##### SERVICING

minor (every 9k)	£180
major (every 18k)	£397.74
cam belt only @ 63k	£500

##### PARTS/COST

headlamp	£258.02
front wing	£63.92
front shock	£105.75
front brake discs (pair)	£206.71
clutch kit	£232.54

##### INSURANCE

all	group 18
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##### CONTACT

Fiat M C, Coupe Reg 01291 628720

##### I BOUGHT ONE

Matt Teeman advertising executive



After three years, my turbo is still a delight to drive. It had a few teething problems, though, with the central locking and stereo. Although my car's received £4,000 in body repairs due to the rigours of urban life, I'd definitely consider buying another one



Full-on performance for minimum wedge. That's what the Nissan 300ZX has to recommend it here.

We did consider one of our favourite driver's cars for this group, the Nissan 200SX. Yet for similar money a 300ZX has not one but two turbos attached to a three-litre V6 engine, squirting out a hefty 274bhp through a similar rear-drive layout. What that means is a wide, raw-edged sub-supercar.

The 300ZX further stands alone in this test because our budget makes it the oldest car here – £10,000 buys an early G/H-plate UK car at best.

Our H-plater proved entertainingly hairy, that grunty twin-turbo V6 offering the sort of instant thrust that can lead to middle ear problems. The adrenaline buzz is amplified by an absence of traction control to tame the rear tyres, four exhaust outlets noisily urging on the driver to try even harder.

Want one? Well, first you'll have to find it. Having last been offered in late 1994, the 300ZX is just a fraction too old to be found on dealers' forecourts. However, a quick leaf through *Top Marques* magazine soon turned up thirteen 300ZXs offered in private sales.

Next step is to suss out exactly what it is on offer. Our scan through the ads uncovered short-wheelbase, two-seater left-hand-drive 300ZXs imported from the States, naturally aspirated V6 2+2 and two-seater right-hand-drive 300ZX grey imports from Japan and twin-turbo 2+2 targa-roofed UK cars. Go for the last mentioned, boasting the best

spec including leather and aircon, plus the most easily traceable history. UK cars also tend to prove easiest to sell on.

Final choice is between a five-speed manual or four-speed auto. With the performance-dulling automatic taking nearly two seconds longer to blat from zero to 60mph, 90 per cent of buyers seek out the manual car – even though 50 per cent of 300ZXs are autos.

Despite its relative reliability, don't think a car with the 300ZX's performance is going to come cheap.

A major service is needed at 54,000 miles and by 60,000 miles those twin Garrett T25 turbos will be due for replacement. The cambelt will also need swapping at this point. The total bill, to you sir, starts at £2,000.

These are complex cars, with a computer-controlled Super HICAS rear-wheel steering system. Independent expert Peter Rosenburg of Silvia Engineering warns: "A potential big cost is leaks from any of the four silicon-filled bushes, on which the whole rear subframe is mounted. If there's what looks like oil seeping out around them, budget £1,000 to get it fixed. These cars are hopelessly underbraked too, so juddering through the steering under braking points to overheated, warped front discs."

With the likely mileage of a £10k car, make sure all the work's been done.

Now prepare for the next step in Nissan 300ZX ownership: convincing your friends that you haven't taken up a new career as a drug dealer.

#### NISSAN 300ZX

##### ENGINE/PERFORMANCE

2,960cc 24v V6 twin-turbo, 274bhp  
0-62mph 5.9secs, 155mph (ltd)

##### TYPICAL PRICES

1990/H 80,000 miles	£10,000
1991/H 70,000 miles	£12,150
1992/J 65,000 miles	£15,250
1993/K 50,000 miles	£18,495

##### SERVICING

minor (every 6k)	£82
intermediate (every 12k)	£164
major 54k (incl cambelt)	£485

##### PARTS/COST

headlamp	£282
front wing	£244.40
front shock	£111.74
front brake discs (pair)	£196.70
clutch kit	£235

##### INSURANCE

all group 18

##### CONTACT

The Z Club 01277 374201

##### I BOUGHT ONE

Steve Ellerby quantity surveyor



I've had it for two years and I would not let it go for anything. It's such a highly specified car for the money. The car might be nine years old but the driving experience is still exhilarating. It's not ideal for constant use, but it's great on the right journey



The MR2 reads like a far more exotic car than 10 grand would normally buy. The housewives' Ferrari is a mid-engined, rear-wheel-drive sportster complete with all the supercar styling cues: side strakes, flying buttresses and pop-up headlamps... only it's got a Toyota badge stuck on the front.

Hence the second-generation MR2's image is just a touch too blousy for some. Peek past that peroxidized image, though, and you've got a car that feels a bit special but can also be expected to be as reliable as any Corolla.

Our £10,000 easily buys a 1995 M-reg MR2 GT complete with a detachable T-bar roof and a mere 60,000 miles on the clock. Scarcely run in, you might say. Such later cars have two-litre four-cylinder engines that demand a sound thrashing to give their 173bhp best. Earlier H/J-plate MR2s like our photographed car look even better value, being a mere £7,500 with sane mileage for an early 154bhp GT. They're still just about in production although nearly-new cars aren't such a fine idea, costing almost twice our limit.

That mid-mounted engine layout may appear pretentious in a car that has the performance of a 16-valve Golf GTi – especially as it robs you of a fair degree of practicality – but it's there for a reason. Properly set up, MR2s are nimble and entertaining over a wiggly road. Yes, lift off the gas when tanking through an open corner and, as with any mid-engined car, you run a risk of spinning off into orbit. However,

driven progressively, these can be rewarding cars to live with.

Only three factors are likely to ruin the MR2's grin-stretching ability. First, the tyres must be in perfect nick; if they aren't, the MR2's unpredictable handling characteristics will be magnified into a severe dose of schizophrenia. Second, accident damage can turn the chassis into a warped, ill-handling mess. And third, all four wheels adjust for track and toe-in; setting this up isn't an under-the-arches job. If things are allowed to work their way out of place, a set of rear tyres can be got through in barely 5,000 miles.

In fact, the attention of the local grease monkey is certainly not recommended on MR2s, except for anything but the most minor of glitches. Cars without full Toyota service histories should be avoided, and that book full of stamps needs to include a cambelt change at 60k miles. Toyota's own 'Fourlife' anti-freeze is also required in order to avoid the potential problem of rotten engine seals.

With such thorough care, the best news is that MR2s just go on and on. Looked after, they won't rust and can realistically be expected not to give any major mechanical headaches at this mileage. In fact, a four-year-old car such as ours should still be feeling like new now and, as long as that servicing schedule is kept to, will continue to give you all the entertainment of a miniature Honda NSX.

OK, you can stop sniggering now.

#### TOYOTA MR2

##### ENGINE/PERFORMANCE

1,998cc 16v 4cyl, 173bhp  
0-60mph 7.7secs, 137mph

##### TYPICAL PRICES

1991/H 70,000 miles	£7,595
1993/K 50,000 miles	£9,750
1995/M 60,000 miles	£10,000
1997/P 25,000 miles	£16,395

##### SERVICING

minor (every 9k)	£111
major (every 27k)	£191.50
cam belt only @ 60k	£217

##### PARTS/COST

headlamp	£138.84
front wing	£196.17
front shock	£75.58
front brake discs (pair)	£175.73
clutch kit	£198.22

##### INSURANCE

all	group 16
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##### CONTACT

MR2 Owners Club 01489 881139

##### I BOUGHT ONE

Ken Kinnersley club secretary

It's totally different from your average front-engined, front-drive hot hatch. It's an enthusiast's car.

People say they're impractical but it's amazing what you can squeeze in there. I've not experienced a single problem with any of the three I've owned





No one would consider a Volkswagen Corrado VR6 for its pure pose value. It's more mean than sexy, more bulldog aggressive than effete posturer. And deeply cool for it.

The first 16-valve Corrados arrived in July 1989, the superb VR6 introduced in June 1992. It's this most desirable Corrado that we're talking about here. Like all Corrados it shuns brash styling, gimmickry and tacky add-ons.

There aren't many about, which is a good thing: no-one buys a coupe to see countless identical others sharing the same traffic jam. VR6s are even rarer beasts – and rarest of all is the last-of-the-line Storm model like our photographed car, its plush leathered-up, air-conditioned interior making it worth a £1,500 premium on the used market.

The VR6's narrow-angle 2.9-litre six-pot powerplant transforms the Corrado from capable driver's car to raw-edged road-riper. The 190bhp through the front wheels gives performance aplenty – all this in a three-door hatchback that's just as liveable with as a Golf. Only restricted headroom and titchy rear seats impede on practicality.

Chances are you'll have read about Volkswagen's Corrado VR6 before. You'll have learnt about the creamy surge on offer from that VR6 engine, how easily the car copes with hooligan behaviour through corners and how manageable it all is for drivers of wide-ranging abilities to get the best from it.

On a five/six-year-old L/M-plater with 60-80,000 miles behind it, as fits

our budget, little is changed. The engine still sounds great; the chassis still feels nicely tied down. Age means the Corrado feels primitive in only a couple of main areas. The suspension is heavily borrowed from a MkII Golf and the standard traction control barely tames the scrabbly front-drive power delivery. The steering wheel lacks an airbag and is offset to the left, while the dash is unnervingly similar to that which you'll find in the current Skoda Felicia. It's completely rattle-free, though.

Still, time also proves that the Corrado VR6 has the build integrity to make it a cracking secondhand buy. It's just as well that not much goes wrong, though, since servicing costs can be steep. So seek out a recommended independent specialist and stick to the same genuine parts a VW dealer would fit.

Most concerns with used Corrados lie at the doors of villains. Envy damage is to be expected, while clocking is easily hidden. Proof of mileage from a fully stamped history – showing maintenance attention every 10k miles minimum – is a must-have, while a replaced speedo or malfunctioning MFI trip computer mean it's likely to have been messed with.

Run far from bastardised cars too. Wide alloys only cause tramlining and spoil the Corrado's fine handling balance, while no engine chip could enhance that grunty, sweet-singing VR6 engine. Keep it standard, look after it and you're guaranteed the respect of every genned-up car enthusiast.

#### VW CORRADO VR6

##### ENGINE/PERFORMANCE

2,861cc 12v V6, 190bhp

0-60mph 7.3secs, 141mph

##### TYPICAL PRICES

1993/K 90,000 miles £8,495

1994/M 70,000 miles £10,000

1995/N 60,000 miles £12,250

1996/N 20,000 miles £15,150

##### SERVICING

minor (every 10k) £160

intermediate (every 20k) £250

major incl cam belt @ 60k £400

##### PARTS/COST

headlamp £224.43

front wing £282

front shock £111.63

front brake discs (pair) £75.20

clutch kit £176.25

##### INSURANCE

all group 18

##### CONTACT

Club VR6 01203 402799

##### I BOUGHT ONE

Cos Pieri designer



It's sporty but gives you the chance to carry stuff without being lumbered with a five-door hatch. It's also the sort of car that can take being pounded into the ground. When it does need parts, though, main dealers are very pricey. And the local low-lifes love it



Thanks to The Great Trade Centre for three motors and a top, if damp. spot to shoot 'em (Tel: 0181 909 5511). Also to Whitties Volkswagens of Wimbledon for loan of the Corrado (Tel: 0181 543 5244)

**FIFTH** Let's get one thing clear: last place for the MR2 doesn't mean it's a dreadful car. Quite the opposite. We've yet to meet an MR2 owner who is anything less than satisfied. It's just that, for our £10,000, the MR2 offers pretty much less of everything. Practicality is limited to two seats and room for a hold-all, the dash looks cheap, the four-pot engine needs a sound thrashing to deliver any kind of straight-line go and, though taut, the handling isn't the most involving here. Meanwhile the MR2's excellent record for reliability depends on stringent main dealer attention. And no, we couldn't live with that tarty image.

**FOURTH** There are two reasons why the Nissan promises a heart-pounding ownership experience. First is the startling way it drives. Hugely grunty twin-turbocharged performance and computer-tweaked rear-drive, four-wheel-steer handling make it capable of seeing off any of the coupes here. Unfortunately, further doses of Valium are called for when repairs are

FLASH FOR CASH					
	STREET CRED	DRIVING	DEPRECIATION	RUNNING COSTS	BUILD QUALITY
BMW 318iS	●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
Fiat Coupé	●●●●	●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●
Nissan 300ZX	●●	●●●●●	●●●●	●	●●●●
Toyota MR2	●●	●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●●
VW Corrado VR6	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●	●●●●

needed. Although the 300ZX is a cheap secondhand buy due to its cheesy image, it started life as an expensive performance car and remains pricey to look after. Potential owners will require a wallet the size of their cajones.

**THIRD** Find the right one and all the traditional reasons for choosing a BMW hold true for our 10 grand 318iS. Build quality is excellent and running costs sane. Even a 60,000-miler will only be halfway towards the stage at which it'll start to feel ropery – provided

it has been looked after. Given the same treatment, it will also remain a sweet handler. The essential problem is that the used car market is now packed with donkeys. Finding the right 318iS may well take ages and even when you do, you'll have to live with the fact that there are four other faster cars here.

**SECOND** When it was launched, the Fiat won every new car group test it took part in. It offered the perfect blend of striking looks and rampant go, while retaining a smidge of practicality. Now

you can add a bargain secondhand price to those qualities. Yes, the Fiat can't quite match the ultimate build integrity of its German and Japanese rivals here, suffering wonky trim and electrical glitches. Yet in the most worrying areas – corrosion resistance and dependability of major mechanical components – it's right up there. So the good news is: the best reasons for yearning for one new still hold true.

**FIRST** The chunky, aggressive Volkswagen Corrado VR6 sets about its purpose in a very different way to the swanky Fiat Coupé. For the price of an averagely equipped brand new Polo, you get a car with the most tuneful engine of our fivesome, the handling and sheer oomph to make it as quick over challenging roads as any of the cars here, and with promise to remain driveable and dependable no matter how hard it's used. The Corrado VR6 also has hatchback practicality, bearable running costs and decent residual values on its side too. Give us 10 grand and this is the coupe we'd buy. Oh, go on